

Are Author Visits Beneficial to Students? An Action Research Study

Feature

by Linda Hoiseth, April 2018

Introduction to Our Research

The librarians at the American School of Doha (ASD) in Qatar have run an author visit program, co-funded by the PTA and the library, for the last seven years. Following each author visit, we seek feedback from the students and teachers and share what we have found to be overwhelming praise with the PTA when we ask for money for the next year. Recently we pursued an action research process to formalize our data about these visits. We sought to find out: Are author visits beneficial for students? If so, in what ways?

Rationale

The librarians at ASD rely strongly on feedback from students and teachers to evaluate our library program. Each year we create an extensive annual report with a wide variety of indicators based on the school's strategic goals. For 2017, we chose our author visit program as one area of focus. (See the annual report here: <http://asd.qa.libguides.com/AnnualReport2017>)

Literature Review

The professional literature on author visits provide a number of "how-to" guides, such as "Planning the Unforgettable Author Visit" (Collard 2012) and "Optimizing Author Visits" (Ruurs 2005), most of which include broad statements about the effectiveness of author visits. Naslund and Jobe tell us that through author visits, students are positively motivated to read and write, as is evidenced by the books the children borrow following the visits. Further, they argue, the personal connection an author visit provides can lead to increased "frequency, fluency, and comprehension." They provide a list of ten ways author visits promote student literacy, all of which coincide with things we believed ourselves based on past experiences (2005, 72).

Other common themes in articles promoting author visits are that they are inspirational and fun (Sanacore 1995; Follos 2004; Ruby 2007). All of this made sense to our library team and were reasons we used when seeking funding for author visits. But, we were not able to find any evidence, other than anecdotes, to back up those claims.

Background

ASD is a pre-K-12 school with 2,200 students representing over seventy nationalities. About a quarter of our student population moves each year. Our location in the Middle East is often a factor when authors decide whether or not to accept our invitation.

Author visit schedules are based on the authors' audience, expertise, and connections to our curriculum; not every student has a chance to meet every author. Some authors present to whole grades or divisions at a time, while others work with small groups in art, English, or even physical education classes. The shortest visits are one day and the longest one week. The visits are most often scheduled in the elementary or middle school.

Methodology

In 2017, our library team conducted a survey of students in grades four through twelve. A survey was distributed via email to all students grades six through twelve (a common practice at ASD). Of the approximately 1,230 middle and high school students who received the survey, 193 responded. Some fourth and fifth grade classes were asked to complete the survey during a regularly-scheduled library visit, resulting in another 187 survey responses, for an overall return rate of 380 surveys, or about 31%.

The survey began with: "What school year did you begin at ASD?" Then, the students were presented with these questions about each author who visited during their time at ASD.

- Do you remember meeting ___?
- If you remember meeting ___, what are your memories or impressions of his/her visit to ASD? What impact did it have on you? What did you learn?
- If you remember meeting ___, how would you rate his/her visit? (1 = bad, 5 = excellent).

The final question was "What is the value of the author visit program?"

We looked for statistical results with the data, but more importantly, codified the comments. We looked for trends in the answers and highlighted in one color, for example,

every time a student said something about being inspired to read. We then tallied the statements by topic.

Findings

Of the 380 survey respondents, 100 reported that they had been a student at ASD for all seven years of the author visit program, 127 had come within the last year or two, with the rest fairly evenly distributed in between. The numerical ratings for the authors ranged from 3.7 to 4.8, with an average score of 4.3. The average rating did not appear dependent on how recent the visit was or how many students remembered meeting the author.

Here are the most frequently cited impacts drawn from the students' comments:

- Students learn about the author's craft including writing, illustrating, and research.
- Students find author visits entertaining and fun.
- Students learn more about the subjects that the authors write about.
- Students are encouraged to read more and from different genres.
- Students like connecting with authors and buying signed books.

What Real Writers Do

According to our students, learning about writing is the most common benefit of author visits. In describing the value of the program, a seventh grader wrote, "It allows the students to get inspiration and build on ideas that the authors have talked about. It also gives some people a career choice if they enjoy writing or illustrating."

Students learn about the persistence and patience that writers have and learn to appreciate the skills of the authors. A tenth grader remembered this from Jack Gantos's visit: "He talked about editing his writing at least 16 times." Naomi Shihab Nye inspired this comment from a ninth grade student: "I remember her reading us one of her poems and understanding how you could capture such a sad part of life and turn it into something beautiful like literature."

This year's visit was by Candace Fleming and Eric Rohmann, so they had more mentions in our survey than anyone else. One of the big impacts Fleming made was in our students' understanding of the research process and that authors do the same things the students are taught to do. A sixth grader said: "I really liked her talk about research. It made me see research in a way that isn't so boring. She explained it like she was a gossipier."

Some lessons learned depend on the specialty of the author who visits. Most of Rohmann's comments were about illustration. Taylor Mali taught the students about poetry. Niall de Burca and Marc Levitt taught the students about the craft of storytelling.

Author Visits Are Fun

Authors who made the students laugh received good marks, with being entertaining or fun mentioned frequently. Our author visit program started seven years ago with Gantos, and his visit has had a lasting impact. Of the 100 students who were attending school at the time, fifty-nine responded that they remembered his visit. (The twelfth graders were in fifth grade when he visited and the fifth graders were in pre-K.). Many students talked about how funny he was, but also appreciated his craft. One tenth grader wrote, "I remember he used to record everything significant to him in his diary which was bound by rubber bands, not a lock. He was hilarious! He also had that story where he would beam light off his watch to his teacher."

Learning about the World

Authors share knowledge from the research they do, and several students commented about what they learned on unique topics. Students mentioned learning about giant squid, Amelia Earhart, pearl diving, Sri Lanka, yellow fever, Islamic inventions, experiencing new cultures, the creation of basketball, new words, coral reefs and pollution, Qatar, the origin of language, and more.

Inspired to Read

It's not surprising that author visits encourage students to read more and to choose new genres. An eleventh grader wrote, "They show me books to read and get me interested in them. Every time they would come, I would get one of their books and read it because they made it sound interesting." Another eleventh grader wrote about Laurie Halse Anderson's visit, "It impacted me to read more historical fiction books, which I learned a lot from."

Several students reported discovering a new interest in nonfiction. A fifth grader said this about Julia Johnson's visit: "I realized how important and fascinating things you might not have imagined would be so interesting." Another fifth grader wrote about Fleming: "Even history related books can have a bit of REAL storytelling in it that makes it exciting to read. Even to little kids."

Connecting with Authors

For many students, making a personal connection with a "real, live author" (a phrase used several times) was what made the visits special. Students commented on the connections they felt to Anderson, writing things like, "She talked to me about pursuing the arts." "I remember...just having a really good connection." "I think that it really changed how I look at normal book authors."

Nye also connected with many students, especially with students of Arab descent. "I felt connected to her because she was Arab," wrote a ninth grader. An eleventh grader said, "I loved her visit so much. She was so funny and so real."

Being able to get a signed book is a big deal to some students. A seventh grader wrote about Nye, "I bought two of her poem books and I read them to this day!" "

A senior had this to say about author visits in general, "It's always interesting to know more about the career of being an author and how even though they may be these famous-ish people that sell countless books, they still have similar experiences to what others have, in terms of hardships of life and other obstacles that apply to not only writer adults, but everyone else."

Reflections

For our students, author visits have proved beneficial in a number of ways. The benefits the students perceived confirmed what we believed to be true. These benefits might vary depending on the author and the audience, but there wasn't a single author who didn't have a positive impact in some way, or one who received a negative rating.

The results of our study were reported on briefly in our annual report. We will continue to seek the support of the PTA to provide these experiences for our students. And, as in the past, we will seek immediate feedback after a visit to share with the school community. It will be interesting to compare the immediate results with this more longitudinal study.

Works Cited

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